State of New Mexico
ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT
Office of the Secretary
Harold Runnels Building
1190 St. Francis Drive, P.O. Box 26110
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502-6110
Telephone (505) 827-2855
Fax (505) 827-2836

BILL RICHARDSON
GOVERNOR

RON CURRY
SECRETARY

DERRITH WATCHMAN-MOORE
DEPUTY SECRETARY

April 1, 2004
Immediate Release

Contact: Jon Goldstein, NMED Communications Dir.
Phone: (505) 827-0314

Environment Department Findings of Tritium in White Rock Springs Provides Further Evidence of Need for Comprehensive LANL Clean Up

(Santa Fe, NM) — Recent water quality testing by the New Mexico Environment Department's (NMED) Department of Energy (DOE) Oversight Bureau at several springs along the Rio Grande in White Rock Canyon have shown elevated levels of the contaminant tritium. While the levels detected are far below the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) drinking water standard and considerably below the threshold for human health concern, the presence of tritium in ground water at this site is another clue to Los Alamos National Laboratory's (LANL) impacts on deep ground water and the Rio Grande.

"This finding is yet another piece in the rapidly filling in LANL water pollution puzzle," said NMED Secretary Ron Curry. "It's these sorts of findings that make the investigation and clean up required under NMED's Corrective Action Order so important. It also indicates the need for continued funding of NMED's oversight abilities at DOE's facilities in New Mexico."

This finding, although not a health concern, is more supportive evidence of a deep ground water connector pathway from LANL, a known tritium source on the Pajarito Plateau, to the Rio Grande. This pathway would indicate travel times of 50 years or less between the lab and the river. Additionally, this information is further evidence of lab-derived contamination reaching the Rio Grande, a planned future source of drinking water for the cities of Santa Fe and Albuquerque.

NMED's samples collected during 2002 and 2003 also contain other LANL indicator contaminants such as sulfate, chloride, nitrate and trace perchlorate. Tritium concentrations in these most recent results range from 3 to 49 picocuries per liter (pCi/L). EPA's drinking water standard for tritium is 20,000 pCi/L. Tritium has a half-life of about 12.33 years.

LANL, through industrial operations beginning in the 1950's through the early 2000's, discharged wastewater into canyons and the shallow aquifer with tritium levels in the millions of pCi/L. These shallow aquifers recharge intermediate aquifers as well as provide some recharge to the regional drinking water aquifer. The springs tested in the recent water quality effort discharge ground water from the regional aquifer beneath the Pajarito Plateau and are located downgradient of LANL.

For further information contact Jon Goldstein, Communications Director, NMED at (505) 827-0314.

###